

1924 Victrola Still Playing after Many Travels

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Many of us remember our grandparents having a hand-cranked Victrola record player in their homes. It is hard to imagine everyday life in America in the early 1920s. Radios were just being introduced, and there was no television or Internet. For home entertainment, many families read books, magazines, and local newspapers. Wealthier families might have an upright piano to play or sing along with. Card games and parlor games like checkers and dominoes were standard evening entertainment. In the evenings, people often sewed, quilted, and embroidered.

Clarence F. Maley was born in 1886 in Maysville, Kentucky. It was a small river town on the Ohio River about 60 miles southeast of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1924, Clarence F. Maley was a 38-year-old bachelor farmer living in the Maysville area.

In 1924, for home entertainment, Clarence F. Maley bought a new hand-cranked Victrola "talking machine" from Maysville retailer J. W. Jenkins Sons Music for 150 dollars. This price would be equivalent to about 2,900 dollars in today's money. This Victrola was a Victor VV-215 model with serial number 76020, indicating it was produced in 1924. These were popular hand-cranked console-style phonographs with an internal horn. The lower cabinet doors were hinged, and the volume was adjusted by opening and closing the doors. The lower cabinet also held the phonograph records. This Victrola was a mid-line flat-top console, priced at 150 dollars, with about 102,500 produced, making it a very common but solid machine.

About a year after Clarence F. Maley bought his new Victrola, a pretty young lady moved to Maysville to become the new county nurse. Her name was Frances Ann Bodley. She was born and raised on a farm just northwest of Fairbury. She was a graduate of a Chicago nursing school and served as an Army nurse during World War I in a Chicago military hospital. After the war, she served as a public nurse in Oklahoma for a couple of years. She then decided to move and become the county nurse for the Maysville, Kentucky, area.

Clarence F. Maley and Frances A. Bodley got married in Pontiac in 1927. He was 41, and she was 31 when they married. After the wedding, they set up their home in Maysville.

Clarence and Frances Maley had two boys. Their son Charles Maley was born in 1934 in Maysville. His brother John was born in 1936 in Maysville. In 1937, the family moved from Maysville to Fairbury. They moved the Victrola, along with another 1920s record player, from Kentucky to Fairbury. The Victrola was placed in the living room of their Fairbury farmhouse.

In the early 1940s, brothers Charles and John Maley got into a wrestling match in the living room of their farmhouse northwest of Fairbury. During their wrestling match, they accidentally broke one of the Victrola's front legs. After receiving the appropriate punishment, their father, Clarence F. Maley, was able to glue the broken leg back together.

In the 1950s, the Victrola was moved into a storage room on the second story of the farmhouse. The finish on the outside of the Victrola cabinet turned black over the decades as the original shellac/varnish darkened and absorbed household smoke and oils—a common problem with phonographs of this era. By 1980, the finish on the Victrola's outside had turned ugly black.

In the early 1980s, Dale C. Maley, son of Charles Maley, stripped off the ugly black finish from the Victrola and restored its original brown color. The turntable felt was also replaced. After more than 55 years, the old Victrola still played the old records, and the sound was very good.

Dale Maley then moved from Fairbury to South Carolina for about two years. Because the repaired legs were very fragile, the moving company hired a local carpenter to build a wooden shipping fixture to prevent them from breaking. The old Victrola was moved from Fairbury to Greenville, South Carolina. Two years after that move, the old Victrola was again moved from South Carolina to Athens, Georgia. Three years later, the 1924 Victrola was moved from Georgia back to Fairbury, Illinois. By the time it returned to Fairbury in 1999, the 1924 Victrola had traveled through four states and survived multiple long-distance truck moves—remarkable for a cabinet with one leg repaired from a childhood wrestling match.

It is a common misconception that if someone cranks an old Victrola too many turns, it will "overwind" and break the mainspring. When the Victrola was new in 1924, it was designed so the user would wind it until the crank met a firm mechanical stop, and normal winding to that point would not harm the spring. Over the decades, however, the original grease often hardens and parts wear; this extra friction and metal fatigue can cause the mainspring or related components to break, which likely gave rise to the overwinding myth. In reality, the springs usually fail from a combination of sticky, hardened grease and many years of use, not from an evening of enthusiastic winding.

This old 1924 Victrola has now been in the Maley family for three generations. Now the fourth generation of children listens to it play old 78 rpm records, including the lively dance tunes and early jazz their great-grandparents enjoyed.

Even though Victrolas from the 1924 era often bring only about 100 to 150 dollars on the antiques market today, this one is priceless to the Maley family—a working piece of family history that has survived many children, a broken leg repair, and moves to four different states.



The Victrola, originally purchased by Clarence F. Maley in 1924 in Maysville, Kentucky. In 2026, the great-great-grandchildren of Clarence F. Maley enjoy listening to the old Victrola, which has survived a wrestling match and moves between four different states.

